

Gender Informed Programming

Examples of Current Practices at Five Afterschool Programs



Key Findings

A majority of staff at programs are female. Only one program has a balance of male and female staff members.

Programs endorsed a “gender blind” approach, providing the same activities to boys and girls.

Staff encouraged boys and girls to participate in activities they enjoy, regardless of gender expectations. This was especially true for encouraging girls to participate in sports or physical activities.

During site visits, staff commented some parents expressed gendered, cultural norms. In some instances, gender influenced how staff interacted with or how they considered themselves models for children.

Background

During middle childhood, often defined as ages 6 to 12, children develop a greater awareness of gender¹ specific social expectations and experience increasing pressure to adhere to gender norms.¹ As a result, boys and girls begin to express different interests and engage in different activities that may conform to conventional gender expectations. This often results in boys and girls needing different types of support and opportunities to promote their optimal development. For example, during late childhood and early adolescence, girls tend to reduce engagement in physical activities.² Decreased physical activity has both immediate health consequences and is one of the possible contributors to later health differences between boys and girls, including lower self-concepts and higher rates of mental health needs among girls.³ Additionally, both boys and girls have an

¹ Here gender refers to socially constructed characteristics, behaviors, and presentations of self as either a boy or girl.

increased risk of mental health problems during early adolescence—although this risk increases for girls earlier during adolescence as compared to boys.⁴

Afterschool programs are well-positioned to support the unique developmental needs of girls and boys to help prevent later behavioral health issues through gender aware programming. These programs reach a significant number of children. In 2014, 7.8 million children participated in an afterschool program and one in four families had a child enrolled.⁵ In addition, the nature of program routines and activities are often more flexible than the traditional school day, offering more opportunities to tailor programming to the unique needs of girls and boys. Indeed, high quality programs recognize girls have their own distinct needs, interests, and skills and use gender-sensitive strategies to support them.^{6 7 8}

Afterschool programs can support developmental domains in gender informed ways. Gender aware programs intentionally incorporate gender considerations and apply a gender lens during program design and implementation. According to an international panel of experts who developed guidelines in 2016, gender informed programs can offer a transformative approach to 1) critically examine norms and dynamics, 2) support equality, 3) strengthen or create equitable norms and dynamics, and 4) change inequitable norms and dynamics.⁹ In the context of afterschool programs, this might include providing equal opportunities for boys and girls to access positive male and female role models through gender balanced program staffing, consideration of how they may differentially engage in program activities, and offering programming and activities that promote equitable outcomes for both.

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Afterschool programs may impact or benefit boys and girls in different ways. In the domain of social-emotional and behavioral health outcomes, including positive school engagement and displaying fewer risky/problem behaviors, a few studies report greater benefits for girls.¹⁰ Others report greater reductions in disruptive behaviors and improved social skills for boys.^{11 12} For physical health outcomes, studies generally find greater benefits for boys as compared to girls.^{13 14 15} Existing literature discusses how afterschool programs typically struggle to increase girls' participation in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and state additional work is needed to identify more salient "girl specific" strategies that afterschool providers can use to promote girls' involvement in physical activities.¹⁶ In response, there are a number of gender specific afterschool programs for girls (see Box 1). Overall, these programs have demonstrated positive impacts on girls' body image, self-esteem, and eating attitudes/behaviors.^{17 18}

Box 1: Example Afterschool Programs Targeting Girls

Girls in the Game

The goal of Girls in the Game (GIG) is to enhance girls' health literacy, empower girls to believe they can make healthy choices, and promote self-control around healthy life choices. A randomized controlled trial of the effectiveness of GIG in promoting social-emotional and physical health in a diverse sample of low-income 8 to 12-year-old girls found small but significant improvements in their body image and nutrition knowledge, but no impact on self-esteem or body mass index.

Girls on the Run

The goal of Girls on the Run (GOTR) is to educate and prepare girls for a lifetime of healthy living and improve self-esteem, body image, and healthy eating attitudes. Two quasi-experimental studies of the impact of GOTR on social-emotional and physical health for predominately White 8 to 13-year-old girls found positive program impacts on self-esteem, body size satisfaction, eating attitudes/behaviors, physical and running self-concept, and fear of becoming fat.

Overview of Brief

This brief summarizes how five afterschool programs—serving elementary age children and representing diverse geographic regions, settings, and populations served—view their roles and contributions to provide gender-aware afterschool programming. For an overview of the study, see the related brief entitled *“Providing an Essential Service: An Overview of Afterschool Program Support of Children’s Social-Emotional, Behavioral, and Physical Health During Middle Childhood.”* Findings were gathered through interviews with multiple program staff and observations of activities during the two-day site visits to answer the following:

- Is afterschool program staffing gender balanced?
- What evidence is there of gender aware programming?

Gender Balanced Staffing

With the exception of one program, afterschool programs were staffed by mostly females, but interest in hiring more male staff was expressed by the other programs.

Balance of gender in staff. Program staff completed a short demographic questionnaire asking them to identify their genders. Two programs have entirely female staff. Two others have all female staff with the exception of a male administrator at each. One has a balance of both male and female staff as frontline providers and supervisors but with female administrators.

Valuing a gender balanced staff. The two programs without male staff expressed an interest and desire to hire more males. They found recruiting and hiring male staff challenging and discussed how having them, especially as frontline providers, would be beneficial for program dynamics and would provide positive male role models for both boys and girls.

“We have mainly female staff, so I would love to bring into the program males who can model for boys, sensitivity, kindness, power, passion.”

“That’s a challenge too. I’ve been trying to move just to have some type of balance. Because I think a male presence changes the dynamic even with the girls and, of course with the boys.”

Gender Aware Programming

One program provides gender specific programming. However, staff at all programs were generally reluctant to discuss gender aware programming, endorsing instead a priority on “equal opportunities” and interest in supporting each child’s individual needs and interests.

Equal opportunities. Overall, staff were reluctant to acknowledge the different developmental needs of boys and girls or to discuss how these may inform programming. Instead, they described efforts to tailor activities to individual interests and abilities and expressed a value and priority on providing “equal” opportunities. Specifically, staff across programs encouraged both boys and girls to participate in activities they enjoyed and activities that would help develop particular skills or help them to be successful in life, regardless of social expectations around gender. Notably, staff explicitly encouraged girls to engage in physical activities and boys to engage in arts and crafts.

“Gender based; I haven’t thought about. What we do for the boys? What we do for the girls? Because sometimes a little girl can be very kinesthetic and emotionally less aware, and sometimes a little boy can be that way too.”

Gender specific programs. Only one program offers gender specific programming. This includes a program for girls designed to promote bonding and positive self-concepts and a program for “boys of color” designed to promote life skills and self-confidence. This afterschool program also provides “girls only” time in the gym a few times a week, in response to girls requesting time alone to play games they enjoyed without negotiating use of space with the boys. Two other programs offer gender specific opportunities (e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts) and sometimes separate boys and girls to discuss particular issues, like self-hygiene, peer conflict resolution, or “girl empowerment.”

Boys’ and girls’ engagement in activities. As mentioned, staff were generally reluctant to report differences in program options for or selections by girls and boys and attributed most observed differences to individual preferences and age; still, several staff noted that boys were more likely to engage in physical or sports activities, while girls were more likely to engage in sedentary or tabletop activities like arts and crafts. One program addressed these differences by offering dance, volleyball, and badminton—physical activities they believed would draw more enthusiasm from girls. Another site discussed how girls are more likely to participate in social activities that are generally peaceful while the boys tend to engage in activities and forms of imaginary play characterized by fighting and aggression (such as war or fighting games). Only one male staff member at a program openly discussed differences he observed between them, stating boys prefer action-oriented activities while girls prefer “glitter” and “accessories.”

“Yeah, well, I mean the continuous trend is, you know, boys are more really into action and sports and girls are more into accessories and... They're actually more knowledgeable on life day to day, girls are than boys are. Boys are just into high energy stuff.”

Gendered cultural norms. A few programs described parents or school personnel adhering to gendered cultural norms. For example, two programs discussed instances of parents expressing specific gender expectations for their children and the kinds of activities in which they would engage. At one program, this included a parent not wanting her daughter to play basketball. At the other program, staff discussed how parents—particularly some of the fathers—do not approve of their sons participating in “girl activities” like jewelry making or sewing. At another, a staff member discussed that at her previous job a school employee told boys that jumping rope “is not a boys’ game” and how she intentionally involved the boys in jumping rope to show them if “they like to jump rope, they can jump rope.” There were other instances when staff themselves expressed gendered, cultural norms and expectations. For example, staff at one program discussed the different ways they encourage boys and girls to get along, such as specifically teaching boys to open doors for the girls.

“Anything we offer to boys; we offer to girls and vice versa. Sometimes it doesn’t go over so well, specifically with the dads. The moms are okay with the girls doing boy things, but the dads have an issue with the boys doing girl things.”

Staff considerations of gender in staff-child interactions. Three programs offered isolated examples of how they explicitly consider gender of the children in their instruction and interactions. At two programs, female staff explained that they join basketball games in front of their girls to serve as a role model, encourage girls to be physically active, and illustrate that playing sports is “for girls.” At another program, a male frontline provider shared that he was hesitant to address “female stuff” because “Whoa, let a woman handle it, because you all are more understanding (in reference to resolving peer conflicts between girls in the program).”

Program Successes and Opportunities for Improvement

Programs are dedicated to providing children equal opportunities and avoiding prescribed gendered expectations for how children engage in afterschool activities. Staff members encourage both boys and girls to participate in a wide variety of activities, including ones in which they may be less interested, with special attention to involving girls in sports and physical activities. At the same time, most programs appear to have not explicitly examined their own personal gender expectations and norms or those of their communities and afterschool programs. Instead, programs defer to gender-blind policies that prioritize equal opportunity rather than selecting, designing, or providing gender informed programming.

Implications for Policy and Practice

To fully leverage the opportunity of afterschool programs in meeting the unique needs of boys and girls, additional research and support is needed to:

- Encourage afterschool programs to become more gender aware to improve understanding, attention to, and support of the unique developmental needs of boys and girls. This might include helping afterschool programs consider how gender norms and dynamics function within the context of afterschool programs and their communities. Cultural norms surrounding gender and gender expectations vary by race, ethnicity, and age of staff and children (in afterschool programs and their surrounding communities). Raising staff awareness about this intersection

may improve their attention to and support for the unique developmental needs of the boys and girls they serve.

- Examine the unique developmental needs of boys and girls during middle childhood and consider how afterschool programs can best support boys and girls to prevent later gender disparities. For example, programs can further promote engagement in physical activities to help mitigate elevated risks among girls for negative body images or mental health issues in early adolescence. Likewise, programs can consider avenues for supporting boys' social-emotional and behavioral health to prevent future concerns and possible disruptions in academic achievement.
- To support children's emerging sense of identity, both staff and children need guidance in how to safely and openly discuss behaviors, norms, and expectations. Staff may benefit from support on how to develop welcoming and accepting afterschool communities, with plans to prevent and, as necessary, address bullying as a function of children's gender identity.
- Achieve more gender balance in afterschool program staff members—especially frontline providers—to provide equitable gender dynamics. Both boys and girls can benefit from positive male and female role models. As children transition into adolescence, positive role models and healthy relationships with adults serve as an important protective factor against risks they may face (such as unstable homes or pressure to engage in risky behaviors). Providing gender balance among staff also has the potential to change children's inequitable gender norms by seeing males perform traditionally female roles of caregiving.

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